

MOVIES

Murder is still the tie that binds

By Frank Rich

If it were not for a faith in conspiracies, real or imagined, I wonder if anything would hold these United States of America together. In a land where the daily motions of our lives defy any notion of rationality—whether we are buying inflationary meat in a supermarket, smoking “lemon menthol” cigarettes or watching *Hollywood Squares* on television—it becomes a psychological necessity that we try to make sense out of the big front-page events of our common experience. Given the stuff of which history has been made during the past 15 years—the Kennedy and King assassinations, the Vietnam war, the ascendancy of Richard Nixon—it becomes clear that only conspiracies can explain all the grotesqueries away. We erect and cling to vast, convoluted webs of villainy and deceit much the way the French once placed their hope in cathedrals.

Conspiracies are the opiate of the people, both on the left (whose grim analysis of the origins of Vietnam was validated by *The Pentagon Papers*) and on the right (which actually conspired to manufacture conspiracies, like the “Chicago 7,” so that the public would be able to rationalize and punish antiwar demonstrators). But some conspiracies are better than others, with the best of all being those that involve murder, especially the murder of Americans of some celebrity. (If you haven’t figured out why the Ellsberg foreign-policy revelations had such a short media shelf-life, it’s because a plot to murder Asians thousands of miles away just doesn’t have that “down home” appeal.) Let’s face it, Watergate itself won’t completely galvanize the proverbial Peorias of our society until that moment if and when the Nixon administration can be linked inextricably to some (literally) deadly crime of the century. Indeed, that’s what the President’s legal defense is all about: since James St. Clair has made it perfectly clear that neither obstruction of justice nor breaking and entering nor any other known executive malfeasance can qualify as the “high crimes and misdemean-

ors” the Constitution requires for an impeachment conviction, what high crime could possibly be left? Only murder. Even the White House realizes that killing—at least the killing of someone white who has had his or her name in the paper—is a crime to which the entire country can still relate. If Nixon were to reveal such a deed, he wouldn’t have to drop another shoe. We’d have a conspiracy of a piece with all the others, a tie that would bind us all together; we could look to the Bicentennial as a celebration of union rather than a funeral of fractionalized despair.

Such a happy ending is, at this writing, elusive, and, in lieu of evidence that Nixon instructed Dita Beard to plant a bomb on Mrs. Howard Hunt’s plane or once employed Donald DeFreeze as a valet, we must fall back on the two Kennedy assassinations for

nourishment; they remain the most treasured set-pieces of our last collective folklore. Commissions may come and go talking of rash gunmen acting on their own, but we continue to turn the facts over in our minds, clinging to alternative explanations for the tragedies, looking for the conspiracies that can provide the logic we crave as a society. Not that any joker with a nefarious plot to peddle can automatically win his way into our hearts. Surely, for instance, no one has much use for Mark Lane anymore, that man who is blessed with the singular talent of making second-gun theories boring. Last fall a fictional movie based on his JFK-assassination theories, the David Miller-Dalton Trumbo *Executive Action*, put people asleep from coast to coast. (Similarly, a strident film documentary on Bobby’s demise, *The Second Gun*, died quietly on the box-office vine.)



The always electric Warren Beatty as an investigative journalist in Pakula's *The Parallax View*.

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* THIS FILM'S DISTRIBUTION GOT TIED UP. GOT SOME GOOD REVIEWS *

And yet if someone can come along and serve up the familiar elements of our ghoulish dreams with freshness and pizzazz, in the form of either entertainment or journalism, it behooves us to line up at his door. That, I believe, will be the case with **The Parallax View**, a classy if not exactly brilliant slab of assassination suspense-drama that is director Alan Pakula's first thriller since *Kluge*.

Working from a screenplay by David Giler and Lorenzo Semple Jr. (from a novel by Loren Singer), Pakula builds his movie on a premise so familiar we can taste it: a RFK-style senator is shot during a campaign appearance . . . a distinguished, grey-haired panel of heavies decrees the deed the work of a mad-dog assassin (a busboy) who was not a part of "any wider conspiracy" . . . three years later a hip investigative reporter (Warren Beatty), the kind who wears his chutzpah like a badge, realizes that a lot of witnesses have died under mysterious circumstances and sets out to crack the case. Although there's nothing new about this basic plan—which is smartly unloaded in the film's first five minutes—the story soon takes off in explosive directions; Pakula detonates a series of loud and colorful narrative firecrackers (involving everything from bomb scares to raging floods) that only someone as jaded as Gordon Liddy could fail to eat up.

At the glorious center of the conspiracy that Pakula gradually unfolds is a mysterious corporation (financed by ITT? the CIA? the USSR? the UN?—it doesn't make any difference) that performs a most distasteful service for its clients. It would be cruel of me to indicate here exactly what the business of that faceless organization is, but, suffice it to say, the nature of the evil involved accounts for much of *The Parallax View*'s appeal. So does Warren Beatty, a force to reckon with in his own right. While his performance in this picture is unlikely to dissipate the memory of his great contributions to Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* or Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, the truth is that even under these relatively undemanding circumstances, which by and large require him to play himself, Beatty showers the screen with a magnetic vitality that cannot be matched by any other American movie actor. Pakula has also blessed him with the services of an entirely pleasing supporting cast, which includes Hume Cronyn as a cynical newspaper editor, Walter McGinn as a spooky functionary who likes to "earn

the loyalty of antisocial people," and Paula Prentiss as a neurotic newswoman who at one point assures the hero that she "has never killed [herself] successfully."

My complaint about *The Parallax View*, and I do have a serious one, transcends matters that pertain to a few gnawing details that at times threaten to undermine the movie's overall credibility. I'm more concerned about the promise of the film's guiding metaphor, that of the title itself, which implies an approach to the material that Pakula doesn't always bring off. While the word "parallax" (a noun, not an adjective, by the way) aptly sums up the radical shift in perspective we get on the film's final scene through its smashingly ironic outcome, Pakula doesn't consistently reinforce his work's ambiguity (and thus its suspense) along the way. In *The Parallax View*, everybody is pretty much whom they appear to be, and the crucial question of the story boils down to who is going to do what to whom and do it first. What's missing is some equivalent to the tape recording of Coppola's *The Conversation* (still the best conspiratorial thriller, indeed the best thriller of any variety, so far this year) or to the characters played by Eva Marie Saint and Kim Novak in Hitchcock movies like *North by Northwest* and *Vertigo*—evidence or people or objects that we can view and review at constantly shifting angles throughout the film. Pakula's climax is a jolt, all right, but it snaps rather than resonates: it's an ending that wraps up and elucidates some of the movie's last-hour events, but it's not a window through which we might examine many of the characters and practically the entire drama in a wholly new and startling light. There were times when I felt the director might be heading along this higher path—particularly in the opening sequence, in which we see the assassination site, the Seattle Space Needle, as measured against both a totem pole and the squalor of the city's raunchy downtown; soon, though, he retreats to easier effects, such as documenting the steely corridors of sterile skyscrapers (also done by Coppola in *The Conversation*).

I'm also a little disappointed at Pakula's failure to restrain himself from using a political rally at a large convention hall for his closing scene. It's true that he gets some fresh mileage out of this oldie-but-goodie—there's a lovely aerial shot of a corpse-laden golf cart zigzagging among some red, white and blue banquet tables—but an invocation of *The Manchurian Candidate*'s classic

climax, which by definition sets up the expectation of a sniping, does seem uninspired, no matter how much the two films' resolutions may differ. (Coincidentally, Richard Condon, from whose novel that earlier cold-war gem was adapted, has written a fabulous new thriller, *Winter Kills*, about a JFK-breed assassination after which some witnesses die, etc., etc. . . . Are we in the midst of a literary conspiracy here, too?)

In any case, I doubt that these criticisms will matter to most audiences who elect to see *The Parallax View*. Though it lacks the breadth of those great thrillers to which we can return again and again even after we know how the ending turns out, this drawback will only have a bearing on the movie's fortunes at that time when our nonfiction conspiracies outstrip it; when that happens, all but the best intrigue entertainments will be obsolete. Meanwhile, until the stain of blood spills over Watergate, or until we find a missing link that chains all our conspiracies together (I'm hoping that Richard Nixon and Jack Ruby were fraternity brothers at Whittier College myself), a movie like *The Parallax View* can go a long way toward keeping the home fires burning.

Le Petit Théâtre de Jean Renoir, which was made for French television in 1969 when its creator was 75, is the purest distillation imaginable of a sensibility I have no hesitation about calling the greatest in the history of movies. Indeed the aesthetic air of this "little theater" is so rarefied that audiences unfamiliar with the rest of Renoir's career may find it a bit baffling. Like the late films of other masters of the medium—Hitchcock's *Topaz*, Chaplin's *A King in New York*, Ford's *Seven Women* or Hawks' *El Dorado* (to name a few of my favorites)—this one unfolds in serene and muted terms, visual signals that have become discrete with the passing of time. While one doesn't have to experience an entire oeuvre to appreciate an artist's final, most highly stylized achievement, such knowledge can enhance the pleasure—whether one is looking at the most abstract black-and-white geometry of a Mondrian canvas, reading a James novel like *The Golden Bowl* or watching a movie like *Le Petit Théâtre*.

This time around, Renoir graces the film with his own physical self—now a wizened shadow of the figure who filled the role of Octave in *The Rules of the Game* (1939). Introducing each of his three theater pieces (plus a song interlude by Jeanne Moreau that is, para-

doxically enough, at once satirical and wistful) with a few low-key remarks, he reminds us constantly of the creative force that stands behind the enterprise's magic as well as of that distance which separates the stage from the real world. Although there is a great deal to admire and enjoy in his first two films-within-the-film—a Hans Christian Andersen Christmas parable and an ersatz musical about a bourgeois housewife's love affair with an electric floor waxer (her put-upon husband pleads for "deliverance from all mechanical noises")—*Le Petit Théâtre* does reach an identifiable peak in the concluding episode.

"The King of Yvetot," as the third section is titled, takes place in France's resplendently sunlit south, the setting of both the director's own 1959 *Déjeuner sur L'Herbe* and his father Auguste's post-impressionist paintings. This landscape, where verdant trees seem to bristle eternally in playful breezes, proves ideal for this story of the victory of love over recklessness and convention: the organic poetry of nature wipes out whatever pettiness blights those mortals who venture within its domain. Among the many lovers who gambol giddily amidst the vibrant white light of this Midi, the one I most adore is Dominique Labourier as a young maid so busy dreaming of a future as a glamorous courtesan that she forgets little details of her work, like cooking the fish she serves for lunch. Her infectious, non-stop laughter cuts to the heart of Renoir's vision—a spirit that shapes every frame of *Le Petit Théâtre* so completely that one gets the sensation of being awash in the sublime currents of the filmmaker's soul.

Michael Cimino, who makes his directorial debut with an action movie called *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, has talent that cannot be denied, even though it's impossible to say on the basis of this effort just how deep his resources are or in what direction he intends to apply them. Maybe the key to Cimino's future is that he stop writing screenplays; his script for *Thunderbolt*, not to mention the one he did last year for a Ted Post-directed atrocity called *Magnum Force*, betrays an excessive and at times morose temperament. That's why this new movie fails to satisfy at those levels most worth caring about: the caper-suspense plot is a hand-me-down; the central emotional relationship between an old con (Clint Eastwood) and a young one (Jeff Bridges) is spelled out in gooey heart-to-heart conversations; and the

overriding message about the good old vanishing American landscape, besides being a cliché in the first place, is verbally made flesh in dialogue that might give even a *Reader's Digest* addict heartburn.

Having said all that, I will now actually go on to add that this picture has some refreshing and original touches, nearly all of which are to be found along the periphery of the project's main events. Cimino usually does have something to say or show about the often crabby, sometimes forlorn people who inhabit the small Idaho and Montana towns where the movie is set: an aging gas-pump attendant (Dub Taylor, natch) who shouts a crypto-populist spiel at his credit-card customers; a maniacal cracker whose souped-up car has a trunk full of live rabbits; a sullen Western Union office manager who spends his nights reading newspaper-encased girlie magazines in the fluorescent light of his storefront.



Antonelli and Momo in Samperi's *Malizia*: everybody ought to have a maid.

Eastwood and Bridges are amiable enough even though they must frequently speak lines so fraught with metaphorical overtones that the words curdle in midair. George Kennedy also comes along as a bitter and irascible old gangster who, in one of the movie's more perversely appealing jokes, employs a familiar line of street-rhyme to tell a smart-alecky five-year-old boy to go do naughty with a certain variety of bird.

As Stephen Sondheim once wrote in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, "Everybody ought to have a maid." That's pretty much what Salvatore Samperi's slight but generally entertaining comedy, *Malizia* (Malice) is all about: a portly Sicilian widower (Turi Ferro) with three sons hires a voluptuous

housekeeper who slowly but surely whips the family into a frenzy of leering sexual anticipation.

No one is more afflicted than the middle son, the dour 14-year-old Nino (Alessandro Momo), who engages servant Angela (Laura Antonelli) in a psycho-sexual tug of war over which he eventually loses control. The idea that an adolescent boy might lose his virginity with an older woman is a fantasy that has turned up recently in such widely different films as Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show*, Mulligan's *Summer of '42* and Malle's *Murmur of the Heart*; I don't know how common or valid this coital permutation is outside of these pictures and *Penthouse's* letters column, but maybe the sheer eroticism of it all can be its own reward. To this end, *Malizia* features a strip scene that should be any male masturbator's delight and, in the person of Antonelli, Samperi has found a top-flight sexual presence who also happens to be a gifted comedienne.

Filmed on location in its actual setting, Uganda, and employing real-life people playing themselves, *Two Men of Karamoja* never fully involves the viewer in its tale of a grudging and intriguingly complex friendship between a white, African-born British game warden and the black native who, under a new order, will inherit his job. There are interesting moments here and there in this microcosmic portrait of colonialism's last, almost benign gasp, and one gets a taste of the poverty and warfare that disfigure a sad, young nation, but filmmakers Natalie and Eugene Jones dally too long over Disneyesque shots of wildlife and other scenic or cultural diversions; the movie's central story never broadens sufficiently beyond its prosaic basics. What's left is a worthy, sometimes stagy documentary that lacks about half the power of Indian director Satyajit Ray's treatment of similar themes in a fiction-based movie like *Days and Nights in the Forest*.

John G. Avildsen's *The Stoolie* is a manipulative and illogical slice of sentimental crap that features comic Jackie Mason in his "dramatic (sic) debut" as a lowlife loser, Marcia Jean Kurtz as the nice Jewish girl who sets him straight in Miami Beach and Dan Frazer as a cop who chases after them. Next to this thing, the director's two previous middle-class exploitation weepers, *Joe* and *Save the Tiger*, almost seem legit. (Almost, I should say, but not quite.)